



**“When you are a professional...” :
The experiences and identities of highly educated
immigrants in the Icelandic workplace.**

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HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS



MOBILITIES &
TRANSNATIONAL
ICELAND



Background

- Rising immigration in Iceland (from 2% 1996 to 10%)
- Increased need for highly skilled employees
- Brain waste: Skilled immigrants end up in low-skilled positions (Mattoo, Neagu og Özden, 2008).
- Lack of research on migrants' perceptions and experiences of host country labor market (Aten, Nardon & Isabelle, 2016).
- Immigrants' communication and negotiation position in the Icelandic labor market (Christiansen & Kristjánsdóttir, 2016; Kristjánsdóttir & Christiansen, 2017)



Objective

- This research has self-identity and social identity in the foreground.

Research question:

- *What is the lived experience of highly educated immigrants from countries outside Europe o communication with supervisors and coworkers, challenges and opportunities?*



Research

- Twelve in-depth semi-structured interviews with immigrants with university degree who had lived in Iceland from 2-20 years.
- 10 females and 2 males from 26-55 years.
- From: Dominican Republic, Honduras, Indonesia, Jamaica, Canada, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Tunisia and USA.
- One of the immigrants had a law degree, three with Master's degrees, and eight with Bachelors' degrees.
- Analyzed and interpreted according to phenomenological methodology. The three steps of the analysis were used: *description, reduction & interpretation* (Lanigan,1988).





Self- and Social Identities

- **Identities:** personal, social, cultural identities
- **Identity work – Identity construction – Communication Theory of Identity** (Hecht, 1993; Collier & Thomas, 1988)
- **Avowed** and **ascribed** identity
- **Identity gap** - Conflict between avowed and ascribed identity (Martin & Nakayama, 2014).
- **‘Imagined sameness’:** “People have to feel that they are more or less the same in order to be of equal value” (Gullestad, 2002, p.46). If people are perceived too different, then the parties often avoid each other.



Professional vs. Immigrant identity

Ascribed immigrant identity means you are the other – not part of the sameness.

- Emily feels that her co-workers are: “... looking a bit down, because I’m, actually they can see I’m an outsider.”
- Julia: “you always have this, ah, at the back of your head: I’m the outsider”

Avowed professional identity creates a distance from being an immigrant which relates to unskilled, low paying jobs.

- Julia: “I put this extra pressure on myself ... I’m always constantly working, working, working”



Competition with peers

When they receive their supervisor's support, it empowers them and it strengthens their professional identity.

- Julia: “[my supervisor] always treats me with the utmost respect. He’s always waiting to hear what I have to say; he asks my opinion on stuff.”

The Icelandic coworkers appear threatened, seeing the immigrants as competition.

- Julia: “I was dismissed like a small child ... there is a hierarchy of respect”



Fear of creating problems

The professional identity does not solve everything:

- Karen: “you don’t feel comfortable with yourself when you are a professional and then you are just there in the kitchen...”

It doesn’t fit with the professional identity to create problems:

- Julia: “... I have this fear of being the one to start drama. And no one wants to be, you know, considered a troublemaker”
- Julia: “you should be grateful for being in that position so you shouldn’t really try to make trouble where there is none”



Belonging to a language community

An important factor of professional identity is to be competent in the native language but they are not accepted into the language community

- Lindsey feels that the requirements are: “...learning a language perfectly to speak it the way Icelanders speak it”
- Michael: “...you definitely got the feeling that you weren’t going to rise up the ladder any time soon if you would not speak perfect Icelandic or write perfect Icelandic...I’ve twice been replaced by a woman who has considerably less experience than me”



Conclusion

- **Professional identity** is a strength and draws the focus from being a foreigner, but simultaneously encourages competition with coworkers which can lead to exclusion.
- **Support from their supervisor** empowers immigrants professionally but also creates tension among coworkers.
- They have a hard time discussing discrimination that they are experiencing due to the fear of **creating problems** that will have a negative effect on them as professionals.
- Their **Icelandic** language will never be good enough (*imagined sameness*).

